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Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl:

The Recovery of a Slave Narrative

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Chapter 1

The Text and the American Literary Canon

Who was Harriet Jacobs? Was she an abolitionist? Was she one of the first proponents of female rights in nineteenth century America? She was all of these things, and more. Why do people in mainstream America not know more about her? Her groundbreaking autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, tells of her harrowing life of slavery and her narrow escape to freedom in the North. She was one of the first African-American writers to tell such a story. Even more, she was one of the first-- and one of the few-- female African-American writers in nineteenth-century America. So why are people so unfamiliar with Harriet Jacobs and her work? Why is her book so rarely read in America's schools and universities?

There are many reasons for this. For example, at the time of publication in 1861, many critics doubted the truthfulness of Jacobs' account, especially because she used the pseudonym Linda Brent in her book. The question of her identity was a serious issue, but Jacobs was forced to write under a pseudonym because the patriarchal literary standards of the time dictated that a woman should not be capable of writing about a controversial issue like slavery. Pseudonyms allowed women writers to say what they needed to say in their texts, while at the same time escape some of the harsh criticism by male critics. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar:

The literary woman has always faced ...degrading options when she had to define her public presence in the world. If she did not... publish it pseudonymously... she could modestly confess her female 'limitations' and concentrate on the 'lesser' subjects reserved for ladies as becoming to their inferior powers. (64)

Although Jacobs does adhere at times to characteristics of women's writing in the nineteenth-century (such as apologizing and stating her limitations as a woman), her subject matter is more serious and more important than the subject matter that women usually wrote about. Since she was not writing about a "lesser subject" (Gilbert and Gubar 64), she had to protect herself from those who would ultimately doubt the truthfulness of her story. Therefore, she wrote under a pseudonym.

Another reason Jacobs' text was excluded from the canon for so long is because her writing style is very personal; she speaks in first person, often addressing her audience directly. However, she is not solely concerned with herself; she constantly thinks of her children, family, and fellow slaves. All of these and many more elements have not been traditionally associated with "good writing" by critics. The "feminine" characteristics of her writing were considered unimportant and even superficial by those critics and university professors who would eventually create the canon of literature in America.

Jacobs and other nineteenth-century female authors were not similar to males in terms of writing characteristics and subject matter; they were therefore considered inferior:

...the writing of these women often seems 'odd' in relation to the predominantly male literary history defined by the standards of what we have called patriarchal poetics... nineteenth-century... American women writers do not seem to 'fit' into any of the categories to which our literary historians have accustomed us. (Gilbert and Gubar 72)

Because of changing attitudes toward female literature, recent critics have acknowledged that Jacobs was grossly neglected as an important American writer. She is now being rediscovered as one of the most influential African-American female writers of the nineteenth century. This tradition of African-American women's literature begins with the eighteenth-century poetry of Phyllis Wheatly, and it continues with the publishing of Ann Plato's book of essays (1841) and with Harriet Wilson's novel, Our Nig (1859). Jacobs is a rich part of this early tradition; her autobiography is a slave narrative, novel, political text, and historical document combined. Jacobs is one of the pioneers of this tradition, and her text needs to be read, studied, and analyzed by students and scholars. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

the writings of nineteenth-century Afro-American women

in general have remained buried in obscurity...in these works of fiction, poetry, autobiography, biography, essays, and journalism resides the mind of the nineteenth-century Afro-American woman.

(Foreward xvi-xvii)

With efforts underway to recover female African-American texts, and formulate this African-American literary tradition, Jacobs' narrative stands out, and critics are finally recognizing this.

Jacobs was born in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina.

When she was six years old, her mother died, and she was taken into the home of her mistress, Margaret Horniblow, who was very kind to Harriet and her family. Here she was taught to read and write and sew. Unfortunately, when Jacobs was twelve, her mistress died, and Jacobs was willed to her three-year-old niece. The niece's father, Dr. James Norcom (called Dr. Flint in her book), was a cruel man who subjected Jacobs to relentless sexual harassment. To escape rape by Dr. Norcom, Jacobs engaged in a sexual liaison with a single white man in the town named Sawyer (called Mr. Sands in her book). Mr. Sawyer was a prominent figure in the town, so Dr. Norcom was afraid that if he abused Jacobs, Sawyer would spread it around town that he was mistreating his slaves for no reason. Jacobs kept herself protected from Norcom by keeping herself pregnant with Sawyer's children. By the time she was twenty-one, Jacobs had two children by Mr. Sawyer, a girl and a boy. Dr. Norcom

threatened Jacobs again, telling her if she refused him he would send her to one of his plantations to be a plantation slave, rather than the domestic slave she now was. Jacobs accepted this rather than become Norcom's concubine. However, she could not stand by and accept it when Norcom sent her young children to the same plantation to become working slaves. She could not bear that kind of hard life for her children because of the cruelties they would suffer as well as because they could be sold at any moment.

Jacobs decided to run away. Her children were jailed, but at least they were safe. When friends could no longer hide her, her family hid her in a tiny shed on the plantation. She stayed there for seven years until she finally had the chance to escape to the North. She was very sick and weak when she was finally able to make the escape because of lack of sunlight and exercise for seven years. However, she managed to find work as a nanny for a nice family in New York. She saved money and sent it back to her children, hoping one day they could all be reunited. Finally, Dr. Norcom died, and his daughter sold Jacobs her freedom.

After this, Jacobs worked as an abolitionist, fighting for an end to slavery. She counseled and helped escaped slaves as they came to the North. Her daughter, who had been living with a relative of Dr. Norcom's, was reunited with her. Her son, now grown, worked and traveled around the country, but

visited Jacobs often. She decided to write her autobiography, not only to make people aware of the injustices of slavery, but also as a form of closure and healing in her own life (Yellin "Legacy Profile" 56). When her book was published in January 1861, she felt she had won an important personal victory. In the Preface to the text, Jacobs (as Linda Brent) says that she has an important reason for writing this book. In a serious and confident tone, she says,

I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what slavery really is. Only by experience can one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect effort in behalf of my persecuted people! (6)

Readers can see, even from her words in the Preface, that Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl is engaging, informative, historical and educational. Why then has it been excluded from the American literary canon for so many years? The history of the formation of the American literary canon is an interesting study, and it sheds light upon how and why important writers like Jacobs were excluded from this body of now classic literature. Paul Lauter asserts that in the 1920s, "processes were set in motion that virtually eliminated black, white female, and all working-class writers from the canon" (23). It was not that blacks and females were not writing, it was because

the literature that they produced was not considered "good enough" or an "important enough" part of the American experience to be included. The canon formed gradually over time, but influential white male professors with Anglo-Saxon/Northern European ancestries ultimately chose the books to be included: "They came, that is, from that tiny, elite portion of the population of the United States, which, around the turn of the century, could go to college" (Lauter 28). As the canon was forming in the 1920s, there were many changes happening in the United States. Large numbers of immigrants were coming into America at this time, a large number of blacks were moving North from the South, and the suffrage movement was gaining more and more attention. This narrowing of the literary canon was about controlling the so-called ideals of America, and it excluded much of the written American experience that was deemed unimportant or unacceptable because those texts did not showcase white male American ideals and values. The professoriat in America was small, elite, and they were limiting the choices of what mainstream American students were to read for the next fifty years.

The gradually canonized pieces of literature were the "right" stories about the American experience, in the eyes of the elite. America was emerging as a major world power in the 1920s, and the preferred stories were the frontier stories, rather than the poor urban immigrant tales or slave narratives.

The theme of man struggling against nature was an important and worthy theme in the professoriate's eyes. The aesthetic and formal qualities of art and literature were also being defined, and slave narratives and urban fiction simply did not measure up to the formalist view of high literature.

Nevertheless, blacks were writing before and throughout this period, but their writings were kept marginalized by not being accepted into school and university curricula, and even by not being widely published. As Gates point out, "Many of these books have never been reprinted at all" (Foreward xvi). For example, writings like Incidents were often only accepted and read at prestigious black universities; subsequently, the complete body of American literature was subject to racial segregation.

According to Nina Baym, scholars who helped to form the canon continued to focus on "America" as the central theme for texts. The heroes of these books were independent and self-reliant. The world of these heroes also excluded women, and especially black women. There seemed to be no place for Jacobs' text in this narrow canon. As Baym concedes, "women have not written the kind of work that we call excellent" (64) because women's texts seldom have anything to do with these male-centered themes. The entire theme of Jacobs' book-- female struggle and frustration-- was "not perceived as...containing the essence of our culture, and we do not find [this] in the

canon" (Baym 74-75). Jacobs' text was the antithesis of everything considered to be right and good and correct in literature.

Elaine Showalter has also examined the formation of the American literary canon. In books such as A Literature of Their Own and The New Feminist Criticism, Showalter argues for the inclusion of marginalized women writers such as Harriet Jacobs. According to Showalter, since the central themes of men's texts exclude women completely, women need to create a literary tradition of their own. The first step in doing this is to look at the literature that women have already produced and find the value inherent in each text, even if the value is completely different from that which men consider to be important. Showalter discovered that many women's texts-- including Jacobs'-- have certain themes in common. The first is the theme of duplicity-- when things look good on the surface, but underneath the world of the heroine is in chaos. The second is the theme of disease, which includes hatred or disgust for the female body, or when a female character views her body as a source of imprisonment. Another theme is "doubling," when two sides of a female heroine are shown. One side expresses the dutiful woman and the other side expresses her rage. The final theme is the obsessive images of confinement in women's writing. All of these themes are apparent in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.

Like Lauter, Showalter also has explained why women writers such as Jacobs were kept out of the canon. Showalter has conceded that women did not have the same educational opportunities as men; therefore, they could not have possibly produced the same quality of writing that men did. The qualities of female literature that Showalter has taught readers to value were then regarded as not valuable:

...women writers were acknowledged to possess sentiment, refinement,... observation,... domestic experience,... and thought to lack originality, intellectual training, abstract intelligence,... [and] self-control. Male writers had most of the desirable qualities: power, breadth, distinctness, clarity, learning, abstract intelligence, shrewdness, experience,... and open-mindedness. (90)

Only in recent years has Jacobs' autobiography been rediscovered as valuable precisely because of these elements associated with feminine writing, which were originally the cause of her virtual exclusion from the serious literary arena.

Besides these elements of feminine writing, and besides the fact that she was black and female, there are reasons why Jacobs' text has been excluded from the American canon. These reasons, or issues, have to do with her style of writing.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl has a very sentimental tone, which Jacobs uses to appeal to her audience of white female

readers; however, the tone was not considered to be good quality writing. The use of sentimentality in writing was a feminine characteristic, and since they were

denied participation in public life, women were forced to cultivate their feelings and overvalue romance... critics found this intensity, this obsession with personal relationships unrealistic and oppressive.

(Showalter, A Literature of Their Own 79-80)

Despite what critics may have thought, Jacobs uses the sentimental tradition of the period to her advantage in order to prove her similarity to this audience because they, as women, could relate to each other. In turn, Jacobs' text was read by female abolitionists, but the text was devalued from a literary standpoint.

In addition to sentimentality, Jacobs often spoke to her readers in the text, addressing them directly. This, too, was considered to be bad form, or at the least, not formal enough to be in the modern American literary canon. Finally, because she never had any schooling, Jacobs' autobiography seems, at times, to be very plainly written. The lack of descriptive language and lack of complex structure also devalued Jacobs' text.

Slave narratives, especially, were not to include any form of sentimentality because they were supposed to tell the story of slavery to freedom in an unbiased manner. If blacks were

to use sentimentality, it would seem as if they were trying to make whites feel sorry for them, and this was unacceptable in the racist society that existed (even in the North). In fact, slave narratives written by former male slaves, like Frederick Douglass, included many of the themes seen in the traditional men's literature of the canon, such as conquering the frontier (in the slave's case, escaping to the frontier), striving for independence, and making a life as a self-reliant individual. Consequently, male slave narratives were more commonly accepted and more widely read because of the similar themes even though they were written by black men. This made narratives like Jacobs' stand even farther apart. Her narrative does have a great deal of sentimental language and subject-matter. Because of this, her narrative was considered to be less credible. In her article "Surviving the Garret: Harriet Jacobs and the Critique of Sentiment," Krista Walter quotes John Blassingame in his book, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South, and his scathing critique of Jacobs' work:

The work is "too melodramatic" to be considered an authentic slave narrative...[because] "miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page..." ...Incidents fails to adhere to the privileged and masculine themes of the slave narrative

genre...[and] conforms to the less respectable themes
and language of the popular sentimental romance. (190)

Because Jacobs tried to appeal to her female audience by
adhering to the sentimental genre they were familiar with,
her book was dismissed as nothing more than melodrama.

The sentimentality continues in the text with Jacobs
often apologizing directly to her female readers. This tone
of apology was common in women's writing of the time. Annette
Kolodny quotes the author Marion Harland in the introduction
to her nineteenth-century novel: "Mine is a story for the table
and arm-chair under the reading lamp in the livingroom, and
not for library shelves" (48). Women apologized for "daring"
to write, and they spoke of their writing in a self-deprecating
manner. By apologizing, they held onto their femininity, while
at the same time their books were getting published and their
stories were being read. Jacobs followed this same pattern.
In her preface to the book, Jacobs says, "When I first arrived
in Philadelphia, Bishop Paine advised me to publish a sketch
of my life, but I told him I was altogether incompetent to such
an undertaking" (6). Jacobs is apologizing to her white female
readers for not acting "ladylike" in her strong actions.
Writing, especially about and against slavery, was not considered
to be a task that a woman should take on. The only way to be
strong was to eschew the passivity that was considered proper
for women. But one can tell that this tone of apology "only

masks rebellious feelings that Jacobs lets us glimpse throughout her narrative" (Becker 413). Jacobs even says in the preface:

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself...neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of condition of the two millions of women at the South still in bondage. (6)

She has a tone of apology because it is proper to do so; however, she is not sorry for her actions. She just wants her readers to realize that under the stresses of slavery, she was forced to shirk her womanly roles.

Jacobs' narrative was also excluded from the canon because of her personal, first-person narration. However, slave narratives and autobiographies are intensely personal accounts. For the female slave, this "personalness" is even more dramatic. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl even "makes frequent appeals to a narratee (usually called 'reader') who is supposed to sympathize with the protagonist..." (Warhol 63). Jacobs used this technique constantly, speaking directly to the reader as if she knows him or her, using phrases such as, "O reader, can you imagine my joy? No, you cannot, unless you have been a slave mother" (261). Female slave writers spoke to their audience as if the readers were personal friends. However, canonized male writers rarely, if ever, spoke in the first

person. In fact, according to Elaine Showalter in A Literature of Their Own, male critics "criticized the overemphasis" of the personal narrative and "understood that lack of education and isolation...had distorted women's values and channeled creativity into...emotional self-dramatization" (80). Jacobs apologized in her writing so that her female readers would sympathize with her. Male writers, on the other hand, had no reason to ask their readers to sympathize with them. It was silently understood that male readers would identify with male writers. Because she spoke overtly to the readers, Jacobs' text was devalued.

Another reason Harriet Jacobs' text was excluded from the canon was because of the lack of descriptive language. Her autobiography is written in a very straightforward manner with plain sentences and undescriptive phrases. For example, Jacobs describes her childhood as follows:

To this good grandmother I was indebted for many comforts. My brother Willie and I often received cakes...after we ceased to be children we were indebted to her for many more important services. Such were the unusually fortunate circumstances of my early childhood. (13-14)

This lack of description makes the book lack an aesthetic quality which was considered an important ingredient in so-called "good" writing. The institution of slavery denied her a formal

education, and denied her the same experiences as male writers. It was defiant of her to learn to read and write at all. This system of patriarchy denied her the tools for becoming a good writer (by their standards) and then condemned her for what she did manage to produce.

Sentimentality, first person narration, and lack of description are the main literary reasons for Jacobs' exclusion from the American canon. The fact that she was black and female further alienated her from the literary world. The canon in America that gradually formed excluded writers like Jacobs. The rigidity of the formalistic rules of the canon totally excluded other qualities of writing (especially qualities of women's writing) that are indeed valuable, engaging, educational, and thought-provoking. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is riddled with those qualities that are considered "other," but are just as valuable in their own right.

Today, with scholars increasingly acknowledging the fact that such a huge part of American literature has been marginalized and ignored, texts like Jacobs' are being recovered and reevaluated. That is coupled with the creation of an (acknowledged) African-American literary tradition; therefore, Jacobs has been the focus of a good number recent critical studies. Critics like Jean Fagan Yellin, Nellie McKay, Franny Nudelman, Sarah Way Sherman and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have gained or are in the process of gaining solid reputations as

Jacobs scholars. The ultimate goal is that Jacobs' text will be (sometime in the near future) integrated into the mainstream curricula of American universities, as it is already a forerunner of African-American literary/historical texts.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl "has had a major impact on the way the entire antebellum slave narrative tradition is conceived" (Andrews 88). Critics are recognizing how unique and valuable Jacobs' text really is. However, this recovery is still in the relatively early stages. As Gates states in the Foreward to the text:

Black women's literary tradition... must be revived, explicated, analyzed, and debated before we can understand more completely the formal shaping of this tradition within a tradition, a coded literary universe through which, regrettably, we are only just beginning to navigate our way. (xvii-xviii)

Because the integration of African-American literature (especially female African-American literature) on a larger scale is still a relatively recent trend in American literature, scholars now have a whole new frontier to explore.

Black texts like Jacobs' have been excluded from the canon and this has affected the very identity of Americans. So many stories were not told, experiences were not shared or even known to have been in existence because of the exclusion of female African-American literary texts. Gates says, "That which had

been systematically excluded has now been revoiced as a mainstream concern" (Loose Canons 103). It is certainly time for female African-American texts like Jacobs' to be studied, appreciated, and accurately valued.

Chapter 2

The Literary Value of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl has been introduced into the American literary canon, and is now part of a rich, valuable tradition of African-American literature. Readers and scholars have started to discover the worth of this text from an historical and educational standpoint. There are several interesting elements in the text, as well as several important themes running throughout that deservedly have started to receive critical attention and analysis.

Examination of these themes have shown this text to be an integral part of the recent African-American literary tradition. Further and continuing study of this text and its themes proves that it is not only historical and educational, but valuable for its literary qualities alone. First, it is important to consider the whole genre of slave narratives and how they are formed and to examine whether Jacobs' text is such a narrative or a sentimental, domestic novel or a combination of both. If indeed the text is a hybrid of slave narrative/domestic novel, then it is important to examine why Jacobs wrote this way, which leads to the discussion of Jacobs writing for a white female audience, and her techniques for relating to women readers. There is also the issue of Jacobs' sentimental first-person voice; at times her narration seems overly dramatic, but at other times her voice is very strong

and forceful, especially in the ways that she verbally outsmarts Dr. Norcom.

One of the most prominent recurring issues is that the text is binary. Jacobs always seems to pit essential themes in her text against their counterparts. For example, in many instances the protagonist Linda Brent seems to have no sense of self; she is lost in the system of slavery and has completely dedicated her life to the well-being of her children and extended family. However, there are also instances where Brent acts autonomously, independently, and strongly.

Linda Brent, Jacobs' pseudonym in the narrative, is portrayed as a binary character in a few different areas. She is portrayed often as a strong woman, and then just as often as a defeated, weak woman, especially in terms of the abuse and silencing of her by Norcom (Dr. Flint). Another binary issue that is highlighted is the theme of the black slave woman versus the white woman or, more pointedly, the domestic slave/white mistress relationship. Still yet, there is the theme of "women's space" and Jacobs being trapped-- literally in her grandmother's shed for seven years and symbolically in slavery. Jacobs sets this up as a binarism because she is helpless and physically trapped in this cramped shed, and yet she is able to make decisions about her own plan for escape and about her children's welfare. In this light, Jacobs is seen as very much in control of her fate and is responsible

for her actions. Each of these issues and themes can be discussed and critiqued at length, and this is why it is important for scholars and students to explore the deep and rich and complicated literary elements of this book.

Jacobs' writing technique in the narrative should be examined first because of its unique style. Because Jacobs was female she was in quite a different situation than the male writers of slave narratives who came before her, such as Frederick Douglass. In general, former slaves who wrote felt that they constantly had to "prove their full humanity and potential for citizenship through their command of literacy" (Soriso 1). The typical approach that male slaves took when writing their stories was formulaic:

...the plots were predetermined. Most are framed by prefaces, testimonials, and postscripts written by white abolitionists and editors. Most also contain detailed descriptions of whippings, slave auctions, and other instances of slaveholders' cruelty.

Moreover, many of the more prominent male-authored accounts describe the process of self-liberation in similar terms... the path to freedom was marked by the acquisition of literacy... and the solitary journey North. (Smith xxvii)

In order to be taken seriously by readers, slave writers-- male and female-- had to convince their white audiences that they

were capable of such a task. Therefore, male slave narratives often focused on the same themes that American white male novelists focused on, such as freedom and adventure.

Institutions of moral American society were also being affirmed by white male novelists, such as religion, government, and the patriarchal family structure. The values and morals that were considered the foundation of American society-- this "white code" (Niemtzow 103)-- were often imitated in male slave narratives, such as Frederick Douglass': he "seizes a self which is defined by a white code; he meets the terms of the American male's dream in white, conventional limits-- with a job and a wife" (Niemtzow 103). Douglass naturally wanted his readers to be able to identify with him, and he wanted to show the common bond between all men, despite skin color.

Like other women writers of the period, Jacobs had no knowledge or experience of these male-oriented themes. It is only logical then that she wrote of what she knew-- women's life, domesticity, womanly concerns, hardships, and especially, women's quiet strength. The format of the male slave narrative was inadequate for a story like Jacobs': "They [male slave narratives] rarely feature protagonists who suffer over the separation from their families or who bring relatives North with them" (Smith xxx). It is for these reasons that Jacobs' autobiography is a cross between the traditional slave narrative, which calls for a detailed retelling of the slave's toil and

subsequent escape from slavery, and the women's domestic novel, which centers around the home life of the central female character(s) and concentrates on themes and issues that are a part of women's everyday lives. The mixture of the two allowed Jacobs to tell her story more completely.

Jacobs used several techniques in her autobiography that differed greatly from other slave narratives. For example, instead of simply narrating her story in chronological order, she sometimes digressed "for chapter-long contemplations of such political issues as 'What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North' and 'The Church and Slavery'" (Moody 53). Jacobs was able to preach and to make her views heard without appearing to be too vocal and/or fanatical. For example, in the chapter "What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North," Linda Brent explains her views on the inferiority of black men:

Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? What would you be if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man is inferior. But what is it that makes him so?...It is the torturing whip that lashes the manhood out of him. It is the fierce bloodhounds

of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the North, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. They do the work. (Jacobs 68)

She still kept her white audience in mind and wanted to get her anti-slavery message across without offending them. These periodical breaks in her story were a bold, yet subtle way for Jacobs to write what needed to be written about slavery.

Joycelyn Moody, in "Twice Other, Once Shy: Nineteenth-Century Black Women Autobiographers and the American Literary Tradition of Self-Effacement," contends that Jacobs broke from her direct narration every so often in order to avoid the extreme emotional pain of writing such a personal, tragic story: "each essay [digression chapter] functions in part as a means of averting readers' steady gaze away from Jacobs' narrator, providing her a brief respite from searing penetration" (53). By telling her story so candidly, Jacobs risked criticism from her audience, who were perhaps not able to handle the emotional heaviness of such a brutal real-life portrait. Therefore, Jacobs used this digressing technique to lighten the text and to take the focus off herself every so often.

Another technique that Jacobs used that differed from those found in other slave narratives was that in the chapters that focused on her story, her life, she told of the painful emotional abuse that she went through. While other slave writers simply narrated their lives, Jacobs made her story more compelling,

and dramatic, and honest by detailing this harder-to-describe yet very real form of abuse. For example, in the text Dr. Flint makes a cruel, torturous comment to Linda, regarding her children. She writes, "My children grew finely; and Dr. Flint would often say to me, with an exulting smile, "'These brats will bring me a handsome sum of money one of these days'" (122). Jacobs managed to emotionally move her white, female audience with scenes such as this. Emotional abuse was of course common for women to be subjected to, especially by men, but few women dared to write about it as candidly and explicitly as Jacobs. Again, her writing style was groundbreaking for the slave narrative genre. According to Joanne Braxton and Sharon Zuber, "while male-authored slave narratives paint vivid pictures of the terrors of slavery, they usually do not emphasize depictions of the emotional abuse that often accompanied the physical tortures" (149). Jacobs was different because she openly discussed her abuse with her readers.

The emotional and candid telling of her life story leads to the examination of the way Jacobs related to her reading audience. Jacobs knew that the bulk of her readers consisted of white females, as "Northern women, largely from leisured middle-class households, were among the abolitionist movement's most dedicated participants" (Doherty 81). In order to get her book read, Jacobs used emotional techniques because she knew that the "melodrama lent a dramatic edge guaranteed to

stir the pulse and pull the heartstrings of the Northern reader" (Doherty 82). Still, she felt the need to try to dispel the stereotypes that most whites believed to be true about blacks. Most whites saw female slaves as "lascivious Jezebels or workhorse Mammies" (Herndl 561). Jacobs wanted to eliminate these stereotypical roles that female slaves were locked into by trying to identify with women as a whole, rather than as "black women" and "white women." She wanted to bridge the gap between the races and show that all women could identify with the problems and issues she brought up in her book. Being persecuted by men was a problem that most, if not all, women had to face at some point in their lives, and Jacobs addressed this directly, writing "There is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, even from death; all of these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men" (45). By delving into issues that all women could relate to, Jacobs shrewdly gained her audience's sympathy and empathy, which in turn afforded her a loyal female abolition-minded readership.

Critics have also made interesting assertions about the way Jacobs related to women. She and her readers had the bond of what is called "True Womanhood" (Soriso 8). True Womanhood is the name for the events, problems, and sufferings that females had to endure (or at least understand) as part of being female. It is also the term for the way women dealt with these hardships; women were supposed to react with piety,

purity, submissiveness, and a sense of domesticity. Jacobs was mindful of that bond, and any time Linda Brent eschews her feminine roles in favor of stronger but necessary actions, she either apologizes or explains the reasons behind her actions in length to the female reading audience. This occurs specifically when Linda Brent refuses to give in to Dr. Flint's advances. She chooses to go to the plantation rather than become his mistress, explaining "I had a woman's pride...My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (130). Jacobs is careful to never alienate her audience by disregarding the bond of True Womanhood.

Most often in the text, Jacobs shows that she is capable of not breaking the bond--she has to prove over and over again the black woman's similarity to the white woman. Carolyn Sorisio observes in "'There Is Might in Each': Conceptions of Self in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" that "when Linda wants to tell of the abusive sexual language Flint thrusts upon her, she cannot utter his words to her grandmother. Her inability to speak about the wrongs she suffers indicates the devastating effects of 'True Womanhood'" (8). Women were not supposed to speak of the improper wrongs that they suffered. By not speaking explicitly in the text, Jacobs sought to gain the empathy of women. Readers understood what she did not say.

Another way Jacobs demonstrates the similarity of the races and the unity of women is by writing about her female friends

and family members. Linda Brent often leans on her female friends and family members for support, as many women do. When she finally manages to escape to the North, Brent tells her harrowing story first to the wife of her new employer, Mrs. Bruce who "listened with true womanly sympathy, and told me she would do all she could to protect me" (271). Here, Jacobs is not only showing a womanly bond, but she is pointing out a white woman's kindness towards her. Directly showing that white women and black women could be friends and share that bond is extremely important.

Even the structure of Jacobs' text is distinctly feminine. As opposed to male slave narratives, the issues presented in Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl are often set against their counterparts, framing a very complicated portrait of Jacobs' life. This binarism is essentially female, because it shows that there was no simple answer or resolution to Jacobs' problems, relationships, or choices, mirroring the struggles and dilemmas of all women.

The original theory of binarism, introduced by Helene Cixous, is very different from the way Jacobs uses it in her text. Cixous's idea of binarism is what she calls "patriarchal binary thought" (Moi 104). According to Cixous, binarism is generally a patriarchal construct because:

these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can

be analyzed as a hierarchy where the feminine side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance... The couple cannot be left intact: it becomes a general battlefield where the struggle for signifying supremacy is forever re-enacted. In the end, victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor. (Moi 104-5)

Conversely, in Jacobs' text the binary "pairs" do not signify the dominant male theme prevailing over the weak feminine theme. In fact, just the opposite occurs; while there does seem to be a male/female opposition in Jacobs' binarisms, the feminine theme (at times) actually is the victor over its masculine counterpart. This suggests that Jacobs' female narrative is uniquely written and distinctive.

A binary issue in the text that female readers would also be able to relate to is Jacobs' apparent failure to recognize her individual self in some instances, but being strong-willed in others. Linda Brent is constantly mindful of her children, her beloved grandmother, her brother, and her aunts. Nothing she does is for herself; it is for her family. Even as she flees from slavery, it is because she hopes that it will allow her children to be free someday. According to Carolyn Sorisio:

Linda's collective identity and destiny is not atypical for female slaves...the dominant definition of self,

prevalent in male narratives, was not satisfactory for female slaves. Rather, the heroine celebrates her liberation and her children's as the fruit of a collective effort, not an individual one. (5)

So even though Brent seems to lack an apparent sense of self, it is not negative. Rather, it is an aspect of her personality that other women can fully relate to, because the bond of True Womanhood dictates that women should be dedicated mothers and they should not be concerned with selfish desires. Therefore, in the eyes of her female readers, the maternal instinct or lack of self is actually a positive trait in Brent, the dominant half of the binarism. This lack of self is what was deemed as important, humble, and moral from a female point of view in the nineteenth century.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has examined exactly what it meant to be a female slave. She agrees that one of the reasons Brent concentrates so much on her children and other family members is because she has no intrinsic sense of self. Women in the nineteenth-century were defined by men, such as their fathers and husbands. Black men (slaves) had absolutely no value in society outside the work they did for their masters. So where does this leave female slaves like Brent? She has no way to define herself. Genovese concedes, "Slavery stripped men of manhood in general, and fatherhood in particular. As a result, black women had no satisfactory social definition of themselves

as women" (169). This view maintains that because Brent has no husband and no father, she can not possibly have a strong sense of self-identity.

The idea of sacrificing a sense of individual self for the betterment of family is uniquely feminine. Male slave narratives do not share this trait. As noted earlier, male slave writers were concerned mainly with the same themes as white male writers of the nineteenth-century, such as individualism, going out on their own (either by running away or by being made free), exploring, and having adventures-- all by themselves. Brent is the complete opposite of these male writers and the ideals that they upheld. She is not the typical character who seeks individual freedom. According to Sorisio, "Unlike the archetypal American hero who can emerge from his place of confinement and seek freedom as an individual, Linda must be concerned with how her decisions affect others" (7). She can not simply pick up and leave and escape to the North. She always has her relatives to put before herself; however, it is quite a different situation for male slaves:

Because Linda is a self-in-relation, she cannot gain her freedom by escaping alone, as did her Uncle Benjamin; she has to consider her allegiance to her children and grandmother, bonds that are primarily defined by gender. (Sorisio 6)

Jacobs even shows the difference in identity for male and female

slaves as it affects her own family. Brent's Uncle Benjamin simply decides to run away, something that she could never have so easily considered. While Uncle Benjamin, like other male slaves, faces severe punishment if caught, at least he has the individual identity that allows him this choice. The decision to run away is solely left up to the male slave's discretion. For female slaves, however, the plan to run away (if possible at all) is much more complicated, because all family members and their future welfare have to be taken into consideration. Brent can not leave on a whim; she has to make sure her grandmother, aunts, friends, and especially her children, are cared for.

In contrast, there are many instances in the text where Brent does have a very strong sense of identity, especially when she defends herself against Dr. Flint. This is again where the text's structure is binary in nature. The strong identity half of the binarism is the passive theme, however, which is why Flint is always Brent's oppressor. She is able to defer him but not defeat him with her strong self. Thomas Doherty writes:

Jacobs' most striking generic departure is Linda's extraordinary sense of self, her maintenance of an autonomous identity seemingly impervious to assault. As singular as she is single-minded, Linda had a strength of character and consistency of personality

more worthy than her creator's gender. (86)

The seeming inconsistency in the nature of her self identity suggests that the issues and binarisms in Jacobs' text are extremely complex. Like any woman, Brent has to conduct herself differently in different situations; she has to alter her identity accordingly.

With Dr. Flint in particular, Jacobs presents Linda Brent as strong and self-confident. When Flint questions Brent about her affair with Sands, and the resultant child, Linda feels humiliated about having a child out of wedlock. Still, she does not back down:

I did not feel as proud as I had done. My strongest weapon with him was gone. I was lowered in my own estimation, and had resolved to bear his abuse in silence. But when he spoke contemptuously of the lover who had always treated me honorably; when I had remembered that but for him I might have been a virtuous, free, and happy wife, I lost my patience.

"I have sinned against God and myself," I replied,
"but not against you." (90-91)

In this scene, Brent bravely asserts herself. By having her admit that she has lost her patience, she is figured a courageous individual with her own thoughts, feelings, and pride. Thomas Doherty also shares this view, observing that "...Jacobs' presentation of self (Linda Brent) is still more unusual for

...she is only herself...face to face with Flint, she plays neither fool nor coquette. She wears no mask" (87). Some readers may find it troubling that Brent has apparently no identity in some cases and a strong sense of identity in others. She needs to behave this way, however, partly so Jacobs can continue to appeal to her white readers (and their bond of True Womanhood) and partly to showcase her strength despite the continued abuse by Flint. Mostly, though, her ambivalent attitude towards her own identity subtly explains her complicated life.

Another binarism in the text that related to the depiction of 'self' is Jacobs' use of sentimental, first-person narration. At certain points in the text, she uses sentimental language in order to appeal to her female audience. At other times, however, she digresses from sentimentality and speaks in a straight-forward manner. According to Franny Nudelman, "Jacobs vacillates between the highly stylized and oblique language that characterizes the sentimental and domestic fiction of the antebellum period, and a direct, succinct and descriptive style" (939). From the point of view of females, the sentimental voice is the active half of the binary pair, expressly because it is a feminine trait of writing, and because it is extremely prevalent in the text. The straight-forward manner is really a trait of male slave narratives, and Jacobs, of course, digresses from that pattern. This contradictory narrative

style allows Jacobs to appeal to her female audience, but also to be distant when she needs to be, such as when she has to make hard decisions, or when she details Norcom's abuse.

As observed in the previous chapter, when the canon was being formed, one of the main reasons why Jacobs' text was excluded was as a result of this sentimental narrative style. Recently, however, much has been written defending her use of personal, first-person narrative. Robyn Warhol contends that this personal narrative is the primary way Jacobs bridges the gap between black writer and white reader:

By accosting the reader as 'you' in an engaging way, Jacobs brings into the text an awareness of the two bodies that are necessary to any literary transaction. In this case, the white body whose hands hold the book and the black body whose hand guided the pen.

(66)

In this way, there is a greater connection between writer and reader. It is important to remember that even though Jacobs' readers could identify with her because they were (mostly) women, there was still the subject of race to address. By relating to and engaging her contemporary reader and acting like a close friend, Jacobs is able to gain acceptance, regardless of her race.

The personal narration devalued Jacobs' text at the time of its publication and in the early twentieth century, but today

such personal narration is considered a positive aspect of women's writing. Every trait of women's writing that was once devalued, such as portraying nurturing family relationships, emotional feelings, and events in tight-knit social circles, is being rediscovered as valuable. As Tompkins points out, women's writing of the past century recognizes

culture from the woman's point of view;...this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness; and... it offers a critique of American society... .(83)

Jacobs' narration is now valued because it engages readers, and strengthens the bond between writer and reader. Readers feel as if they really know Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent when they are finished reading her autobiography. That, in itself, is an aesthetically pleasing quality, unique to female writers and their texts. Jacobs truly moves her readers:

Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery, I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering what I once suffered. (47)

It is very hard for even modern-day readers not to become emotionally involved while reading this text.

Her sentimental voice elevated Jacobs in the eyes of her nineteenth-century white female readers. She was breaking new

ground by appealing to white readers in this way because this was not a common narrative strategy for slave writers. Nudelman asserts, "Her first person narration...radically alters the structure of a discourse that typically constructs the suffering slave as a mute object whose experience must be translated by an empathetic white observer" (942). By invoking the sentimental voice, Jacobs was actually assertive and proved that she needed no assistance in telling her story.

However, if the sentimental narration provided a bridge between Jacobs and her readers, then why did she feel the need to switch, at times, to the more direct, plain form of story-telling? Since Jacobs had to often eschew her feminine role in order to survive in slavery, she used the direct voice for those difficult decision-making moments. Jacobs was shrewd; she knew at which moments in her text it was appropriate to have Linda Brent behave like a lady with the sentimental voice, and at which moments she had to take a strong, no-nonsense approach. Sharon Davie writes of Jacobs' 'voices':

On one hand, we hear the conventional voice that cries "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!" when Linda chooses to take Mr. Sands, a white man who is not her master, as her lover after Flint blocks her marriage to the free black man she loves. On the other, Linda tells her reader clearly "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation."

(95)

Speaking about the same situation (her relationship with Sands), Jacobs uses two completely different voices: the dominant sentimentality designed to appeal to and connect her with her female readers and the less important straight-forwardness that portrays her strength in the face of opposition. Like the other binary elements of this text, these two narrative voices are ambivalent, even contradictory, but they ultimately show that Jacobs' life was very complex; therefore, her ways of speaking, writing, and reacting verbally to situations had to also be complex.

Continued examination of Jacobs' narration and speech shows that she in fact sets up her character, her alter ego Linda Brent, as a binary figure. Linda constantly goes back and forth between being a strong, capable woman, and a defeated slave girl. Ultimately, the strong side of Brent does become the dominant half of the binarism because Brent eventually does escape Flint and the institution of slavery. Jacobs tried to portray the complexity of her situation in slavery, and tried to make her readers understand the lifelong complications that result from many years of abuse, which is why Linda Brent seems to be full of contradictions.

Often times, Jacobs portrays herself (in Linda Brent) as a gutsy woman, more intelligent than most women would dare to be in her situation. When Dr. Flint threatens Linda, she

retaliates in a quiet, calm way, using words, reason, and moral righteousness as her weapons, and "she has, through direct speech, at least temporarily moved their conflict to an intellectual level, a battle of words..." (Braxton and Zuber 148). During a verbal altercation, Dr. Flint says:

"Have I ever treated you like a Negro?...and this is the recompense I get, you ungrateful girl!"...I answered that he had reasons of his own for screening me from punishment, and the course he pursued made my mistress hate me and persecute me. (Jacobs 56)

The calm (and female) way that Linda expresses herself threatens Dr. Flint much more than if she lashed out with anger, violence, or blatant disobedience. If she had lost her temper like a male character might have, Dr. Flint would have had an easy job of just physically punishing her; he would have had a justifiable reason to punish her, according to his racist notion of the slave's role. He provokes her so much; it is as if he wants her to blow up at him. That way, he would have an excuse to beat her or rape her. Dr. Flint is always very conscious of what the townspeople think of him, and if he is unduly cruel to his slaves, people would not believe him to be morally upright. He has to protect his reputation in the town. So it infuriates him that Linda quietly refuses his antagonizing. He hates that she is smart enough and strong enough to resist him. Sorisio points out that "Flint often holds a razor to

Linda's throat, symbolically underscoring both his hatred of her voice and her determination to use it despite the violence of slavery" (14). Brent uses her voice and moral wit as effective weapons against Flint; it is her only defense. Flint is defeated and Linda is the victor in these verbal battles, which shows the strong side of her.

These battles, however, are taking their toll on Brent. She is not immune to the lasting effects of constant emotional abuse. Even though on the outside she is acting in a strong manner, inside the abuse is having a terrible effect on her. She is a defeated person in this way, the other side of Jacobs' binary self. This is illustrated during a moment in the text when Dr. Flint tells Linda that he has just joined the Episcopalian Church. Linda is surprised and wary, because she knows the lecherous doctor's true character. Dr. Flint says to Linda:

"You would do good to join the Church, too, Linda."

"There are enough sinners in it already," rejoined I. "If I could be allowed to live like a Christian, I should be glad." "You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife," he replied. I answered that the Bible didn't say so. His voice became hoarse with rage.

"How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible!" he exclaimed. "What right have you, who are my Negro,

to talk to me about what you would like, and what you wouldn't like? I am your master, and you shall obey me." (Jacobs 115-116)

Linda escapes much physical harm by handling the doctor although the emotional scars of being verbally abused are apparent. Again, she is strong, yet defeated.

In terms of the binary theme of strong woman/defeated woman, much has been written about the abuse that Brent has to endure at the hands of Flint. Anne B. Dalton, in "The Devil and the Virgin: Writing Sexual Abuse in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," puts forward an interesting theory. According to her, Jacobs knew at the time she was writing that young female slaves were often stereotyped as being over-sexed. Thus, she was afraid that readers would blame her for the sexual advances made to her by Dr. Norcom, which "fueled her anxiety as an author" (Dalton 39). Because of this, Jacobs was extremely careful in the way that she phrased her text. For most of the book, Jacobs speaks in first person as Linda. But often, when Linda has to tell of the injustices done to her by Dr. Flint, she switches to third person narrative, speaking of the trials that slave girls in general had to endure. Dalton asserts, "Sometimes, after starting to describe Linda's experience, she abruptly switches to a more concrete description of what happened to another particular slave woman or girl" (54). It is often too painful for Jacobs to describe the details of her abuse; however,

in this way, she can get her message across while protecting her own emotions, and while protecting her own reputation.

Dalton also theorizes that Linda Brent metaphorically plays the part of Eve and Dr. Flint plays the part of the evil demon, the serpent in the narrative (41). As in Paradise Lost, when the serpent whispers the idea of sinning into Eve's ear, Dr. Flint whispers indecent things into Linda's ear. This classical story from Genesis is used to show that Linda is "everywoman" and that Dr. Flint-- the white man-- is the evil demon. It also helps to shift some of the blame from Linda for being somehow responsible for the sexual harassment she has to endure.

Dalton also points out that Jacobs picks the ear as the center of these sexual attacks. She says that:

Julia Kristeva in "Stabat Mater," considers how in representations of the virginal body the ear becomes the site of the woman's sexual experience...Jacobs explored the correlation that Kristeva suggests among hearing, the voice, and sexuality. Her use of the woman's ear as the site of the attack is appropriate and evocative because the abused ear is parallel to the silenced mouth of the molested woman and what she cannot tell. (43)

The fact that Dr. Flint makes Linda's ear the center of his attacks is very important because he makes her feel ashamed and

almost guilty. Again, the text exacts its binarism; Linda knows that the abuse is wrong, yet she is powerless. Flint uses his physical power to lean close and intimidate her. Brent knows that while she may escape some harm by verbally outwitting the doctor, he does have ultimate physical power over her, which is sickeningly shown in the way he leans close to have these "secret" conversations with her. Because he whispers sexual remarks to her, no one is around to witness or overhear the abuse. Brent certainly can not repeat what Flint says to her precisely because of the shame she feels and because of the repercussions she may suffer. In this sense, she is a defeated woman. By using her ear, he silences her mouth.

As a black victim of abuse at the hands of a white man, Jacobs is in an awkward situation. She has to be careful how she portrays the relationship between blacks and whites in her book because the United States is still racially tense. In order to be accepted and taken seriously, she must prove further that all women are the same, could be friends (as with Mrs. Bruce), and ultimately want the same things from life, such as children, happy marriages, and good family relationships. Because she wants to prove these similarities so desperately, Jacobs makes absolutely no reference to any kind of customs or traditions indigenous to the African people, which never would have been acceptable for publishing in the nineteenth-century. Craig Bartholomaeus states, "As in most

early African-American literature, there is in Incidents little evidence of vernacular discourse, particular slang, folktales, or any other exclusive cultural forms" (183). Instead of celebrating differences and her own culture, as is done in black literature today, Jacobs must prove over and over again the "normalness" (by white standards) of the black race.

In some respects, Jacobs was somewhat accepted by her contemporary white readers because she was young, attractive, well-mannered, and she wrote sensitively. However, these very factors also worked against Linda Brent in the views of many whites; she could have been seen as a cunning, sneaky, not-so-innocent, over-sexed girl who is after white women's husbands-- the typical racist view of the young slave girl. According to Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, "...despite her lowly status she possesses many of the attributes which would make her 'marketable' in genteel society, such as piety and beauty. But Linda quickly discovers that these very attributes make her vulnerable to exploitation" (69). Jacobs tries to relate to white female readers by portraying herself as an upholder of True Womanhood, yet the ideals and standards are supposedly too strict for a black woman to achieve. Therefore, the racist attitudes dictate that Jacobs must be hiding something or lying.

Because of these racist attitudes, Brent has to be extremely careful in her dealings with Mrs. Flint. Her relationship with Mrs. Flint is a tenuous one. She is the object of Mrs. Flint's

jealousy because of Dr. Flint's continual sexual advances. Mrs. Flint knows what her husband is doing but is powerless to prevent it. It is ironic that a white woman is as powerless as a black woman in these matters. Jacobs, in fact, realizes this and uses it as another way to prove the similarity between black and white women. Instead of being bitter or resentful towards Mrs. Flint, Brent feels sorry for her because she has a husband as despicable as Dr. Flint: "Yet I, whom she detested so bitterly, had far more pity for her... I never wronged her, or wished to wrong her" (51). The sympathy that Brent has for Mrs. Flint is designed to endear her to white readers. The fact that Brent actually feels badly for this woman who, at times, even bends over her as she sleeps to see if she will give away any secrets in her sleep (54), is the ultimate way to prove her similarity to white women and to prove her bond with the female gender. This relationship, then, is also a binarism in the text: even though Mrs. Flint and Brent are of two completely different worlds, Brent still can relate to her through their common gender. The theme of slave girl versus white mistress is therefore reconciled as a result of Brent's womanly compassion.

Women's space is common theme for female writers to employ as yet another way to bond with their female readers. Jacobs used this concept of women's space as another way to relate to her white readers, and it also surfaces as another binarism

in the text; in her space, Brent is trapped, yet powerful. Jacobs did write it in a slightly different manner than most female writers of domestic fiction; women's space was usually defined as the kitchen, the dressing chamber, the tea parlor. Jacobs, trapped in the institution of slavery, used the shed that she was hidden in for seven years as her "space." As Brent lay sick and freezing, she plays the part of the "dying sentimental heroine" (Vermillion 249). As with typical portrayals of women's space, a lot happens within that space, even though it seems (on the surface) to limit a woman's choices and actions: "She prevents her own capture by embroiling Flint in an elaborate plot to deflect his attention...In her hiding place she...actually succeeds in gaining their [her children's] freedom from slavery" (Vermillion 249). In this way, even though she is limited to her "space," Brent is still powerful.

This particular binarism is hard to resolve. The power that Brent has in her "space" should not be over-exaggerated. This is the hardest, most terrifying experience of her life, and experiences such as this should not be reduced to simply literary techniques. The concept of women's space in domestic novels is a fiction. Jacobs' experience was real, which leads to the binary nature of this theme: Brent is both trapped literally in the shed for seven years and in a sense not trapped because she still is able to make decisions about her plan for escape and about her children's welfare. However,

the decisions that she is able to make are extremely limited in their nature. It is a terrible experience for her that leaves her both emotionally and physically scarred. Brent describes one especially harrowing summer: "I longed to draw in a plentiful draught of fresh air, to stretch my cramped limbs...I had no room to toss and turn" (183). She stays in the shed because it means the eventual freedom of her children, which is, of course, her ultimate goal, even if it means this ultimate sacrifice. Brent makes use of the "woman's" space by making decisions, but she is at the same time trapped in this real-life hole, thus creating another binarism in the text.

The issues and themes Jacobs treats in this text suggest its complexity and literary worthiness; it has much to offer readers. The nature of slave narratives, the appeal to women, the binary structures in the text (no sense of self/strong self identity, sentimental voice/strong voice, slave/mistress, strong woman/defeated woman, and entrapment/empowerment), all suggest that Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is a living, valuable, controversial, and complex work of literature whose worth is continually growing and being discovered. It should be read by critics and students alike, and should continue to be examined and critiqued by scholars.

Chapter 3

An Approach to Teaching the Text

Since the literary worth of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl has been established in recent years by critics and scholars, the focus should now be on teaching this text in classrooms on a regular basis. The text is now read primarily by students in African-American literature courses and in Women's Studies courses. However, students in an undergraduate American Literature course would benefit from reading this text because there is a great need for different types of stories of American conflict, survival, and triumph to be examined. Students should be reading and studying the American experience from all points of view in order to have an accurate idea of what American literature, culture, and history are. Jacobs' text can help students to explore another dimension of American identity. For example, since the text is a slave narrative from a woman's point of view, it is historically unique. The women's issues and relationships focused on in the text are decidedly different from those in other American literature texts. Therefore, while this text does belong in the American Literature curriculum, teaching this text requires conscious and careful planning in order to emphasize the aforementioned themes, which are very much an integral part of women's experience in American literature, but may not be familiar to students and scholars.

The plan to teach the book must be carefully thought out

by teachers because it is not a traditional canonical text, and it may be difficult at first to integrate it into the curriculum for a typical American Literature survey course. As an instructor who began to teach Incidents while its critical worth was just being established, Warren Rosenberg often doubted his decision to include Jacobs on his syllabus. He learned over the years that in order to teach the book effectively he needed to closely revise his teaching strategies:

...I now realize that the current desire to introduce non-canonical texts into our still predominantly canonical courses must be accompanied by a revisioning of our theory and pedagogy. Jacobs' book has both instigated and helped in this revisioning process by leading me and my students to a deeper questioning of what constitutes literature in general and 'American' literature in particular. (134)

Jacobs' text illustrates a different view of the American experience. The themes and motifs in the narrative, such as the struggle for freedom, and the struggle to create an identity are traditional themes in American literature. Because the text is narrated from a female viewpoint, however, it allows students and instructors to examine and question the very nature of the American experience, and of American literature.

In my approach to teaching the text, its structure as a slave narrative will first be studied. Teachers and students

can first study the typical approach to reading slave narratives and even compare Jacobs' book with other slave narratives and study the whole genre. The fact that this is a female slave narrative emphasizes its unique nature; the themes are different from those found in the typical male slave narratives.

Next, the binary nature of the text will be explored. Jacobs set certain themes against their counterparts, which makes for an interesting discussion. One of the issues that exemplifies this binarism is Linda Brent's family relationships, especially the relationships between her and her grandmother and her and her children. In addition, Brent manifests no clear sense of self or identity at times, especially when dealing with her family members. At other times, however, she does seem to be a strong woman, and this conflict is where the binarism becomes most evident.

Finally, the binary issue of gender itself will be studied. Students can examine Jacobs' creation of an autonomous self and the different roles that Brent must play as a female: powerful woman versus genteel lady. In order to appeal to her white reading audience, Brent has to be perceived as an upholder of True Womanhood, but at times the hardships of slavery force her to be powerful and dominating, so she must eschew her lady-like role in order to take action and survive the abuse of Dr. Flint.

BACKGROUND

Before beginning to teach Incidents, students need to be taught pertinent background information. First, they should be introduced to the slave narrative genre and its conventions as well as the "typical" narrative strategies of slave authors. For example, most slave narratives are plainly told tales of the slave's struggle for freedom; they usually have graphic scenes of abuse by white plantation owners and slave masters; they usually end by telling how the slave is struggling, but happy-- living a free life in the North and working hard to support and educate him or herself. Students will need this information so they can identify and evaluate the differences between this format and Jacobs' own text. Excellent sources for students and instructors about interpreting and approaching slave narratives are Valerie Smith's "Introduction" in the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers edition of Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and Darwin T. Turner and John Sekora's anthology of critical essays about slave narratives, The Art of the Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory.

Second, students should be informed about women's roles in society during this time period, the latter half of the nineteenth-century (Incidents was first published in 1861). The majority of Jacobs' reading audience was Northern, white, leisure-class women who were liberal in their abolitionist

ideas, but at the same time conservative about their own roles in their homes. Women of this class were taught to behave and act a certain way in order to be accepted into society. Critics refer to these "rules" as the "Cult of True Womanhood" and Carolyn Sorisio's article, "'There Is Might in Each': Conceptions of Self in Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself," is a good source for background information. According to the Cult of True Womanhood women were supposed to be good-natured, pious, respectful, humble, and gracious at all times, but especially in the face of adversity. It also involved worrying only about so-called "womanly" concerns such domestic issues and family matters.

In addition, students should be informed about the prevalent theme in American literature of self-identity. In other texts of the American literary canon, the creation or search for this sense of self was often a focal point; in Jacobs, the theme surfaces a bit differently, and it meshes with her struggle to conform to the feminine standards of the day. Students and instructors can learn about this by examining some wonderfully informative sources: Janice B. Daniel's "A New Kind of Hero: Harriet Jacobs's Incidents"; "'What Would You Be?': Racial Myths and Cultural Sameness in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Craig Bartholomaeus; and Jean Fagan Yellin's "Incidents in the Life of Harriet Jacobs." Nellie Y. McKay has written a superb study of Jacobs' early life and formation of her identity

called "The Girls Who Became the Women: Childhood Memories in the Autobiographies of Harriet Jacobs, Mary Church Terrell, and Anne Moody." Students will discover that, at times, Linda Brent has no individual identity; she is solely concerned with her family, not herself. At other points, she conforms to this feminine ideal and yet at other times she is a strong woman concerned about her freedom and escaping from Dr. Flint. Students need this background information so they can evaluate the ways that Brent conformed to these prescribed roles and also evaluate the ways that she broke away from them. Students can examine the reasons Brent both conforms to and eschews these roles at different points in the text.

Finally, students will probably need to gain information about the literary concept of binarism. They need a solid definition and some explanation of what this concept means so they can identify it in the text. Instructors can consult a number of sources for definitions, but students should know that the concept was carefully examined by Helene Cixous and other French literary critics such as Jacques Derrida in their study of language constructs, and their ideas are outlined in Toril Moi's Sexual/Textual Politics. Cixous sees binarism as a patriarchal construct where two themes or ideas are pitted against each other (Moi 104-5). Students need to understand the theory of binary structure in order to successfully examine and evaluate the structure of Jacobs' text.

ANALYSIS

The first issue that should be explored with students is Jacobs' text as slave narrative. Students must understand that because this is a slave narrative from a woman's point of view, different issues will be highlighted. For example, they can be asked to read Frederick Douglass' narrative and compare the two. When this happens, students usually "note the dramatic difference between the slave experiences of males and females. [In Douglass] they see the male emphasis on physical resistance and dominance..." (Rosenberg 140). By contrast, in Jacobs' text students usually see Linda Brent as a character who achieves freedom, not by physical resistance, but by intellectual triumph over Dr. Flint and by a complicated and shrewdly constructed plan for escape to the North. Questions that can be used to generate class discussion include:

-- What exactly constitutes a slave narrative?

-- What are the main differences between Jacobs' and Douglass' narratives?

-- What issues does Jacobs concentrate on that Douglass ignores?

Students will probably point out the aspects of Jacobs' concern for her family, her lack of individual self, her sentimental tone, and her concentration on women's domestic lives. A teacher can then ask students:

-- Does Jacobs' emphasis on the domestic lives of females and her sentimental tone make this text more or less a slave

narrative?

-- To what extent is the text a hybrid between a slave narrative and domestic novel?

-- In what ways would it have been an effective means of motivating women to join the anti-slavery cause?

-- To what extent does the sentimentality detract from the serious anti-slavery message and make the text seem like a melodramatic novel?

Whole class sessions can focus on these questions, and students (with the instructor's guidance) can decide on which areas to concentrate. By comparing Jacobs to Douglass, students should discover that Jacobs' text is a different telling of the slave experience and that it is indeed a hybrid of the slave narrative and the sentimental women's novel that was popular in the time period. This hybridization is a unique variation of the typical slave narrative, and an effective way for Jacobs to appeal to female readers (via the sentimental tone and domestic subject-matter) and also to all readers through her struggle for freedom and triumph over slavery. Students should come to the conclusion that while Jacobs' tactics were different from male slave narratives, she needed to write this way in order for her book to be read by abolition-minded female readers. Both Douglass and Jacobs tried to relate to readers in any way possible, but Jacobs was much more conscious of how she would be perceived by readers because she was a woman. She was in

a precarious position, being female, a former slave, and a writer. Douglass, on the other hand, did not need to worry about how readers would accept his story in terms of his gender, but Jacobs was faced with overcoming stereotypes that people held of female slaves. Simply because she was female, readers automatically doubted the truthfulness of her story. Therefore, by employing traits of domestic novels, such as sentimentality, Jacobs broke down color barriers, suggesting black women's similarity to white women. By relating to white women on their level, Jacobs attempted to motivate Northern women to the anti-slavery cause.

Jacobs' sentimentality and womanly concerns were the concerns of all women, black or white. Students should also be reminded that in the past, sentimentality and treating women's issues were thought to be trivial, but today, these elements of women's writing are seen as both valid and valuable because scholars and critics are beginning to realize that the true definition of American literature is pluralistic. Women's experiences have been rejected in the past; now, they are being recognized as an integral part of America's identity. Students can question the very definition of slave narratives and perhaps attempt to create a more encompassing definition, one that would include narratives like Jacobs'.

The second issue to be explored is the binary structure of Jacobs' constructed sense of identity and her relationship

with her family. At times, Brent has no sense of self-identity (she sacrifices it to put her family first), and at other times she is individualistic. It is important to discuss with students the close family ties that Brent has with her extended family, especially her grandmother and children. These close family ties cause Brent to be ever mindful of people other than herself, and every decision that she makes has to include consideration of her family. Consequently, she demonstrates no sense of individual self in these parts of the text. This aspect of Jacobs' story is very different from Douglass' narrative, because he "has no firm connection to any one place" (Rosenberg 140) as Brent and her family do. Some discussion questions to consider are:

- How does the relationship to family differ for male and female slaves authors?
- How might these ties to her family endear Jacobs to her female readers in the nineteenth century?
- How might Brent's absence of an individual self have affected her nineteenth-century readers?

Students should be led to discover that a woman's greatest concern was supposed to be for her family, and by showing this concern, Jacobs was again relating to her female readers. According to the cult of True Womanhood, women were expected to cherish and sacrifice for their families above all else. This was part of being pious, humble, and selfless. The

selflessness directly reflects on and explains Jacobs' absence of self in these parts of the text. She was not expected to have a sense of self; it would have violated the code of True Womanhood. Conversely, male slaves did not have to worry as much about issues of family because it was not a role that males (white or black) were responsible for. Therefore, students will conclude that female readers of the nineteenth-century would have had a positive reaction to this absence of self (because they could understand it), while male readers would have viewed it as a flaw or weakness.

Brent's children and her decision to hide out in the shed to ultimately help them gain freedom rather than stay with them and raise them raises many interesting aspects of the text to explore. Rosenberg asserts, "Her children are the focus of Brent's life [and she]... does put their freedom first" (140). Students will discover that these scenes when Brent is in the shed but can still see her children through the cracks in the wall are the most "emotionally powerful" (Rosenberg 140). Brent has to watch in helpless horror even as her son is mauled by a dog. Students can discuss more incidents such as this, as well as Brent's allegiance to her children and how she again sacrifices her sense of self in favor of concentrating on her family. They can be asked to evaluate Brent's decision to hide out in the shed for seven years, and they could discuss her other options. The issue of Brent abandoning her children while

she is in the shed and leaving them to be raised by other family members can be connected to this discussion. Students should be reminded that Brent abandons her children so that they can be ultimately free. Students then can be led to discuss how Brent's years in the shed actually help her to create a sense of self, even though she is severely physically limited. For example, she can still make decisions about her family's welfare. They can discuss how Brent is emerging as a strong female character. Finally, the binary structure begins to emerge in these scenes, and students can explore how, where, and why this happens in the text.

On the surface, students may think that Brent is indeed abandoning her children, that it is wrong for her to let them be raised by family members and remain exposed to Dr. Flint while she is seeking freedom. When the text is closely examined, however, students will realize that she is of course making the ultimate sacrifice for them. She is sacrificing her physical freedom so that they all can be free one day. This relates to the previously explored issue of women's self-sacrifice for family, and the bond of True Womanhood. However, another interesting theme begins to emerge. Students can begin to discover that in this closed space, this shed, Brent actually has control of herself, and her own life. This is where the structure of the text is binary: she is sacrificing her self for her children's sake, but she can and does make her own

decisions about her plans for escape and her extended family follows her lead. As a result of such behavior, Janice B. Daniel frames Brent as one of American literature's first strong female heroines:

Brent's search for identity forms a bridge between the traditional male figure of the past and the unconventional female protagonist of the future...Linda Brent acquire[s] the ...important quality of heroic female self-affirmation, the ability to survive on...[her] own. (11)

Students can be guided to the conclusion that Brent does have control and she is a strong woman in these scenes; a strong sense of self is apparent but is juxtaposed with the theme of physical entrapment/limitation.

Another angle of the family relationship issue can also be focused on, such as the connection between Brent and her biological parents. Students should be told that Frances Smith Foster says that Brent, after losing her parents at a young age, often takes on the characteristics of her father rather than her mother. She "rejects the more passive strategies of resistance represented by her mother and grandmother in favor of the active confrontation exemplified by her father" (106). Students might be asked to consider the fact that although Jacobs supposedly wants to relate to a female audience (via her use of sentimental tone, first person narrative, and domestic subject

matter) she often acts quite aggressively. In addition, they could be asked how Brent resolves the fact that in some instances she plays the role of the respectable feminine woman while in other instances she eschews that role to take on a stronger, less feminine but more powerful persona. Finally, students can explore the role played by Brent's grandmother in her construction as upholder and teacher of True Womanhood.

A brief discussion of gender roles in the nineteenth-century can help students understand the dual nature of Brent's actions. Brent is supposed to behave in a genteel manner, even if it means sacrificing a sense of self; however, because her situation in slavery is atypical, Brent can not help but eschew those roles at times in order to simply survive in slavery and defend herself against Dr. Flint's abuse. Whenever she must shed her feminine roles, students will find that Brent apologizes to the reader directly and offers detailed explanations of her actions. She hopes that her female readers will understand and excuse her strong actions; she makes it clear that she has no other choice but to be tenacious.

Brent also makes it clear that her grandmother is her greatest female influence. Her grandmother is the person who teaches her the code of True Womanhood: "Linda's conflicts, painful in themselves, are exacerbated by the ideology of True Womanhood, represented once again by her grandmother" (Sherman 177). By rejecting this code at times, students will discover

that Brent also feels as if she is rejecting her grandmother. However, she still takes on the stronger male attributes of her father. This is her way of handling the situation, and it ultimately pays off because she is in fact never raped by Flint, and she does manage to escape slavery in the end. Brent takes a big risk by rejecting True Womanhood and adopting a strong sense of self, but she feels as if it is her only choice. While she loves her grandmother, she does not want this kind of life for herself or her children.

It may help to introduce students to Nellie McKay's theory about the stages of Brent's life, which contributes to the binary structure of her self-identity. Brent does not always feel like a powerless slave; as a small child, she does not even realize that she is a slave. This freedom she feels as a young child empowers her as her identity is first forming. The strength she acquires never fully disappears, even as she grows and realizes her plight in life, not only as a slave, but as a female slave. Therefore, this theory connects to the binary structure by explaining how Brent's dual sided identity begins to form.

Brent's first stage, when she is a very small child, is her Edenic stage. She has parents who love her, a warm extended family, and she is protected from the evils of slavery. She does not even realize she is a slave until she is six years old: Brent "is the innocent who lives in an unfallen world,

a green Eden where life is sweet and all one's needs are met in an atmosphere of care and love" (McKay 110). Brent's fall from this Edenic stage comes at the time of her mother's death. She lives with her mistress, and although "not treated harshly, she senses her powerlessness" (McKay 111). She is now realizing what slavery means. This period in her life is called the personal and political knowledge stage (McKay 111). As Brent grows older, she not only realizes her powerlessness as a slave, but she realizes her powerlessness as a woman. This is the third stage of her life. Because of Flint's sexual harassment, she sees her gender as less valuable and as a hindrance. Sexual abuse, rape, and sexual harassment are punishments reserved by the masters expressly for female slaves. Brent realizes that it is harder to be a female slave, in this respect, than to be a male slave: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is more terrible for women" (Jacobs 119).

When exploring why and how Brent moves through these stages, students will learn specifically about the female slave's mentality, and how Brent is raised to think and act the way she does. Students will discover that Brent is indeed influenced by her father, if for only a short while. The influence stays with her and it helps to explain her strong actions later in the text. From early childhood, Brent's whole family is around her; this explains her strong ties to them later in life. When her parents die, Brent's mistress takes her in and starts to

train her in the ways of a young lady. She is taught to sew, a lady's trade. Later in the text, she knows how to relate to other women, partially because of this training (and also because of her grandmother's strong influence). All of these aspects of Brent's early life have contributed to the formation of her binary identity. She uses the sides of her personality at appropriate times in her life to help herself achieve the impossible-- escape from slavery.

Whether students explore the text's slave narrative qualities, the binary structure, the issue of identity, the family relationships, or the issue of gender, Incidents is not a typical example of American literature; it is wonderfully different, and this is exactly why it needs to be included in the American Literary canon and in school curricula. As Rosenberg points out, "Here is a history from the bottom up-- not the voice of the Harvard-educated elite, or of a white Quaker poet imagining himself into the body of a slave woman... but the experience of slavery from the pen of a slave" (143). Knowing Jacobs' story will help students expand their understanding of a literary genre that is uniquely American, the slave narrative. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl can be placed in juxtaposition to other slave narratives, and it can help students to explore another dimension of American identity. The themes and motifs outlined in the text are an integral part of American literature, such as the search for

an identity and the struggle for freedom. The themes are familiar ones in American literature, but Jacobs' experience and the ways she writes it is unique. This is the story of the female American Slave and all American students need to know Jacobs' story in order to know their own history and their own literary roots.

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